

*caring for yourself*  
WHILE SUPPORTING A SURVIVOR

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SAFE HOUSE  
PROJECT

# step one

## RECOGNIZE THE GRAVITY OF THE PROBLEM

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- > The United States is in the **top three nations** for human trafficking, with estimates in the hundreds of thousands of individuals. **81%** are trafficked for sexual exploitation.
- > More than **84%** of females that experience trafficking are survivors of childhood sexual abuse or prior sexual assault.
- > Of the survivors SHP has served, **40%** are African-American, **10%** are Hispanic, **5%** are Asian, and **5%** are multi-ethnic or other races.

### DEFINITIONS

The definition of sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behaviors that occur without explicit consent, including:

- attempted rape
- unwanted touching of a sexual nature
- the performance of sexual acts through force
- completed rape

The force used in sexual assault includes:

- physical pressure
- emotional coercion
- psychological pressure
- manipulation

Sex trafficking refers to the use of force, fraud, or coercion to induce a person to participate in commercial sex acts. For minors, any commercial sex act is considered trafficking, regardless of force, fraud or coercion.

**In the United States, sexual assault and exploitation through trafficking are considered serious public health issues.**

Survivors of sexual assault or trafficking experience the deep-seated effects for the rest of their life. In most cases, the impacts are seen throughout a survivor's physical, mental, and emotional health, as well as in their opportunities and relationships.

Survivors often struggle with PTSD, complex trauma, flashbacks, suicidal ideation, and/or eating disorders. In particular, survivors of sex trafficking are vulnerable to a variety of sexual health issues and to developing physical health complications as a result of their trauma.

Having experienced a sexual assault in the past can make an individual more vulnerable to sex trafficking in several ways. As survivors of sexual assault face complicated emotions and mental health challenges from their trauma, they can become susceptible to the coercion and manipulation of traffickers. Many survivors struggle with health disorders, substance abuse, and homelessness, all increasing their vulnerability. Furthermore, traffickers may use the survivor's fear of being prosecuted or stigmatized for the assault to control and exploit them.

Due to the high risk of re-victimization, it is vital for survivors of sexual assault or trafficking to be protected, supported, and cared for on a personalized and individual level, both by professionals and their loved ones.



# step two

## UNDERSTAND HOW TO HELP

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### **A large majority of sexual assaults and sex trafficking incidents go unreported in the U.S.**

There are many reasons why a survivor may choose not to report the abuse or tell anyone, including; distrust of law enforcement, a desire to protect the perpetrator, shame about the assault or trafficking, denial that the abuse occurred, concern about not being believed, and worry about being treated differently.

### **What do I do if someone tells me about their experience?**

If a survivor chooses to share with you that a sexual assault or trafficking situation has occurred or is happening now, you may find it difficult to know how to best support them.

Often, the best approach is to simply listen and say that you believe them. It takes incredible courage for a survivor to share their story, so be careful to respect and protect their trust in you. Don't push for information, but be available to listen to whatever they wish to share.

Survivors often struggle with feelings of shame and guilt about the assault or trafficking. Be sure to tell them that it wasn't their fault and that they didn't do anything to deserve it. Pretending that the experience didn't happen is harmful to the survivor, so be patient as they navigate their healing journey. Even if you or someone you know has been through something similar, don't claim to know exactly what they are going through. Remind the survivor that you are there for them and you aren't going to leave them.

Healing and learning to live with an experience of sexual assault or trafficking is a complex, often frustrating process for survivors. Remember that a single timeline for healing does not exist, and be gracious with yourself and the survivor.

Individual survivors will have very different needs for support through this time, so don't hesitate to ask how they would like to be supported. It can be incredibly difficult for survivors to trust. Don't take it personally if a survivor doesn't trust you fully, but instead do everything you can to prove you are trustworthy.

### SIGNS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT OR TRAFFICKING

- > Depression
- > Changes in sleeping patterns
- > Changes in eating habits
- > Low self-esteem
- > An increase in drug or alcohol use
- > Sexually transmitted infections
- > Avoidance of specific places or situations
- > Avoidance of certain people
- > Failing grades or withdrawing from school
- > Self-harming behaviors
- > Suicidal tendencies or behaviors
- > Increased anxiety or depression



# step three

## RESPECT YOUR LIMITS

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### **Caring for a survivor can be overwhelming, frustrating, and emotionally depleting.**

The trauma from being sexually assaulted or trafficked is often deep-seated and complex. As a friend or family member, it is normal and even expected for you to feel unable to handle the full weight of a survivor's experience.

Remember that there is no "right" reaction to hearing that someone you care about has experienced sexual assault or trafficking. Many times, people encounter a wide range of emotions, including:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Disbelief
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Discomfort
- Denial

Feeling these emotions is normal, but it can be difficult to keep them from affecting how you communicate with the survivor in your life. It is vital that you acknowledge to yourself that you are experiencing those feelings but look for an alternative outlet to express them in a healthy way, away from the survivor. It can be stressful for a survivor to feel like they are harming your well-being by sharing their story with you. Ensure that you are fully there to care for them in the moment and channel your emotional needs to your own personal support system.

Remember that your job in helping this person is to simply support them. You are not equipped to be their entire support system, so focus on the manageable ways to help them and seek additional resources as needed.

### **METHODS FOR CHANNELING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS**

- > Creative activities, such as making art
- > Confiding in a therapist or counselor
- > Listening to music or podcasts
- > Reading or listening to audiobooks
- > Journaling your emotions
- > Walking or exercising outdoors

### **Boundaries are just as important in relationships with survivors as they are in other relationships.**

Your support is essential to the survivor's recovery, and you can't support them well if you aren't taking care of yourself. Survivors healing from sexual trauma usually need much time and the help of many kinds of people, so be careful to protect healthy boundaries in your relationship.

It is important to recognize and share with the survivor where your boundaries are. Encourage them to build a support system for themselves so that someone else can be available when you can't. These additional supports could include therapists, other friends, or family members. Do not share their story yourself; encourage the survivor to reach out to others. Remind the survivor that you care about them but it is impossible for you always to be available, so you care about them having a secondary plan when you can't be present for them.



# step four

## EXPLORE YOUR RESOURCES

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### **There is hope and healing for survivors of sexual assault and trafficking.**

As you explore ways to support a survivor, remember that you are part of the process. Protect your ability to support them by caring for yourself and encouraging the survivor to build a support system to help them along the way. The resources listed below may be helpful both to you and to the survivor as you navigate the healing journey together.

### **In emergency situations, always contact law enforcement and seek medical care.**

If a survivor is an adult, it is their choice whether to report an assault or trafficking situation, but remember that emergencies are exceptions. If someone is in danger or is a danger to themselves or others, contact emergency services. In other situations, respect a survivor's choice to report or seek medical help, but encourage them to consider it. Encourage the survivor to seek trauma-informed therapy.

#### **For resources for sexual assault, visit:**

- [National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-4673](#)
- [LGBTQ+ National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233](#)
- [StrongHearts Native Helpline at 1-844-762-8483](#)
- [CDC Sexual Violence Prevention](#)
- [RAINN \(Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network\) - Statistics](#)
- [National Center on Sexual Exploitation](#)

#### **For resources for sex trafficking, visit:**

- [Doing Life with Adult Survivors of Sex Trafficking](#)
- [Safe House Project Survivor Support Line 507.769.0819](#)
- [OnWatch Training IAmOnWatch.org](#)
- [National Center of Missing & Exploited Children 1-800-THE-LOST](#)
- [National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-7888](#)

#### **For more information about how to help someone who has experienced sexual violence, visit:**

[National Sexual Violence Resource Center - Friends & Family](#)

[RAINN \(Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network\) - Tips for Talking with Survivors](#)

[RAINN \(Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network\) - Self-Care for Friends & Family](#)

[Columbia Health - Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault](#)

[Center for Prevention of Abuse - Helping Human Trafficking Victims](#)

[Blue Campaign - How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking](#)

